

The Relevance of Karl Marx to Early Experience and Learning

Dr Simon Boxley interviewed by Richard House

Richard House [RH]: This could be a first, Simon – I don't think Marx is spoken of very often in early-years publications! Can you say something first about why Karl Marx's thinking might be relevant to early childhood experience and family life?

Simon Boxley [SB]: This might indeed be a first! Readers may be wondering what on earth Marx may have to say that's relevant to early childhood. He's been so widely applied and misapplied to so many areas, and so egregiously used and misused, that some may feel his ideas have long outlived their usefulness. Of course I disagree! As long as families have to make hard choices about how to balance the demands of work and childcare, Marx will be relevant. And equally importantly, as long as children's experience of early education is shaped by the economy's demands, Marx's ideas will be of significance.

RH: So are you saying that currently, Simon, children's early educational experience is shaped by economic imperatives? If so, can you say how this comes about, and what might be wrong with this? What might Marx himself say today, I wonder?!

SB: Well, it's one of the great dilemmas in systems of education which are part-funded by the State that the *quid pro quo* for taking the money is that the State's general political priorities tend to become those of educators and learners too. Indeed, as early years provision has migrated inexorably from the church hall to the corporate facility over recent decades, the cost of gradually increasing state subsidy has been a conformity with a certain set of expectations, centring on the requirement to develop in children a skills-base necessary to long-term labour-capacity – and with it a parallel migration from the garden and the kitchen to the classroom, with its phonics and mathematising. A very different experience of early childhood, but one which Marx both foresaw and described when he noted the changes in relations between children and mothers, and the shifts in the kinds of activity undertaken by young children with the requirement to 'work for the capitalist'. In my recent book I touch on this, and even risk suggesting that 'compulsory work for the capitalist' now takes place in both the nursery and the school.

RH: That's clear, Simon. I sense a complex story here on the extent to which what you describe is deliberate, and to which it's the product of how our (capitalist) society "automatically" reproduces itself and its accompanying ideologies (*a la* Louis Althusser's "Ideological State Apparatus", 1971). Can you say something about this, perhaps in relation to your new book? And do all early-years and early-childhood courses perhaps need a module on political economy?

SB: A very interesting point, Richard. Many Marxists recognise the vital importance of maintaining credibility in systems such as early education, to ensure they retain an *appearance* of political neutrality. Ministers of education are often very keen to proclaim that their own policies aren't ideological, unlike those of their opponents. I always think a good indicator of when a policy in this area 'deliberately' advances an economic end is when a minister insists it's merely 'common sense' – and not *ideological* at all!

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On your second question, I wholeheartedly agree. Those educating the educators have become increasingly sensitive to equalities issues, for example, and ever-more willing to challenge 'common sense' thinking on gender, disability and 'race'. But thinking beyond appearances to the economic bases of inequality – particularly class inequality – remains rare, and challenging the political economy of capitalism itself is the last taboo! It's these kinds of questions that my book, *Schooling and Value*, has sought to address.

RH: Thank you, Simon. It seems essential to me that these rich insights are woven into any comprehensive understanding of early childhood.

Simon Boxley is Senior Lecturer in Education Studies, University of Winchester, a former early-years teacher and a trade union officer. *Schooling and Value* (2017) was published by the Institute for Education Policy Studies (£16).